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THE UNAPPRECIATED TIN-PEDDLER HIS SERVICES TO EARLY MANUFACTURERS

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It seems to be a trait of human nature that in the glamor of a big success the small beginnings that made the success possible are forgotten. Some of the great industries of which New England is so justly proud have ceased to remember that they owe their start to the humble and even despised peddler. Because the peddler in his zeal for a bargain often used trickery,¹ that is the thing on which his reputation rests, and not the real service he rendered to the struggling industries of his day, by disposing of their products. The story of the peddler takes us back to early colonial Connecticut.

The first settlers in Connecticut followed the general rule that farming, the getting of a food supply, interests men before any other industry. It is only when agricultural opportunities fail that other modes of earning a living are sought. Connecticut pioneers picked out the rich farm lands along the Connecticut River, and in so doing seized nearly all the land available for agriculture. In the rest of the state the soil is thin and full of rocks, so late comers in Connecticut had to seek some way of gaining a livelihood other than farming. Shipbuilding and fishing became the industries of the shore, distilling rum and molasses the occupation both inland and along the coast. But these failed to fill the demands for employment, so many settlers emigrated westward. It remained for two enterprising immigrants to find a new profitable home industry.

These two were brothers, William and Edward Pattison, who had come to a settlement on the Connecticut River in 1740, and finding no farm lands to their liking, set up the business of making tinware, a trade they had learned in England. This industry required little capital, or labor, and so was fitted for pioneer conditions. Its market was good, for tinware had previously been a high-priced imported article, much prized. The brothers imported sheet tin

¹ For instance, he was guilty of selling hams made of bass wood, cheeses of white oak and nutmegs of wood.

from England at Boston; then carried it by horseback to the Connecticut River town, where it was pounded into shape with wooden mallets over anvils. When a goodly supply of wares was prepared, it was packed into a sack, and with this slung from their shoulders the brothers traveled on foot through the nearby settlements, making house-to-house calls until the stock was sold. Thus began the Yankee tin-peddler.

After a little while the range of the brothers' travels became too great to be covered on foot, so ingenious baskets were fitted to horses' saddles, and the peddlers rode about their business. As their trade continued to increase, young apprentices were taught the art of making tin. The brightest, most reckless young men in the home town were sent out on the road with one or other of the brothers to learn the lures of a trade, involving on one side shining tin, and on the other, caraway and mustard seeds, feathers and old metal. These young men became that great institution, the Yankee tin-peddler. They were brave, for no coward would venture alone on the long journeys at that time. They were clever, for they had no rules to guide them through the accidents of the road. They were highly immoral, for they were always among strangers and alone. They were keen-witted, for they were pitted daily against sharp pioneers. And they were full of tricks, for they would do anything to make a trade.

Of course the neighbors of the Pattison brothers copied their success, and soon Connecticut was the recognized center for tinware. Each home shop sent its corps of men to tour the colonies, so the nasal-toned Yankee peddler was known wherever two or three people were gathered together. When the nation began to build turnpikes, in 1790, these roads enlarged the peddlers' operations, for they allowed him to use a wagon of his own invention instead of the back of a horse. The wagon was designed to carry the most wares in the least space, and was a maze of secret compartments, hooks and drawers. With the coming of canals and roads the peddlers perfected their organization.

Single or two-horse wagons were started from Connecticut in the spring, and traveled north, south and west toward pre-arranged depots. In the fall, workmen from the Connecticut shops were sent by water to such central points as Montreal, Richmond, Charleston or Albany. There they made new articles of tin from raw materials

which they had carried with them. Peddlers worked toward these central points to replenish their wagons, and then struck into the interior for the winter, making house-to-house canvass of their wares. In this way literally every hamlet in the colonies came to know and use the Yankee notions sold by the peddlers.

After 1820, roads had been enough improved so that depots were established at favorable inland points, as well as at points reached by waterways, and so operations were extended still further inland, even to the remotest frontier. Since the currency was in a chaotic state, much of the trading was simply bartering, the peddler taking household products to the towns and town products to the farms, until such times as he could sell for actual money. At the end of a six or eight months' trip the peddler sold his horse and wagon wherever he could, and then made his way back to Connecticut with his gains for his employer. Thus was built a strong distributing and selling organization that closely resembles in some of its details the oil monopoly of to-day, whose hold is in distribution and not in production. The peddlers were not individual traders, but were employed by a few capitalist tin makers in Connecticut. The supply stations were established at strategic points and from these, regular routes ramified in all directions. Thus the whole country was controlled by a complete distributing system.

All this elaborate organization was in the sales department of the business. Its manufacture remained a simple thing. A small shop, rarely employing more than fifteen or twenty men, and seldom conducted on what we know as the factory system, sufficed to keep several times as many peddlers supplied. Connecticut was the recognized leader in the tin industry down to 1850, but the state does not owe so much to the value of the goods produced or to the number of men employed at home as it does to the perfection of an intricate selling system, and the extension of the fame of Connecticut as a manufacturer of useful articles. Tin no longer holds a high place in the state, but the other goods which were carried to their market by the organization made to sell tin, and so dependent on it for their success, have become permanent, valuable assets for the state.

It will be interesting to trace some of these other industries. For that purpose brass goods and clocks have been selected.

The brass industry had its humble beginning in the manufacture of buttons. The first buttons were made of pewter, and cost as high

as a dollar apiece. Pewter buttons gave way before those made from brass. Brass is an alloy made from copper and zinc. The copper for the brass buttons was obtained from old sheathing in Connecticut ship-yards, or from worn-out copper kettles of the rum distilleries. This was mixed with imported zinc and made into sheet brass in mills that had cast and rolled iron in the western part of the state before the Revolution. There was no thought of selling the sheet brass, for there was no market for it. Buttons did have a ready market, and a high value with little bulk, so sheet brass was stamped into buttons which were gilded and put on sale. Since buttons were made of metal, they were usually sold by hardware dealers. The dealers refused to have anything to do with American-made buttons, claiming that English buttons were superior in quality and appearance. But for one thing, the infant industry would have died early. Shut out of one market, the experimenters reached a better, more direct one, by handing over their buttons to the peddlers. Since the buttons took little room the peddler could easily add them to his stock in trade. Through him they found a ready and increasing sale. Although brass was first made to supply buttons, improvements in casting and rolling brass so increased the supply of the sheet metal that the demands for buttons alone could not utilize the surplus. New uses had to be created. The new products were all small. Brass kettles to hang alongside the tin vessels on the peddler's wagon were manufactured. Wire was drawn from the sheet brass, then stamped into pins or hooks and eyes. The peddler was glad to add these things to his outfit, because the greater variety of wares to display made him more sure of striking a trade.

There is a great difference between the tin industry and the brass. Tin manufacturing always remained a simple, small-scale affair. Brass has grown to giant proportions. Tin employed few workers. Brass employs thousands of skilled and unskilled men, women and boys. Tin was short lived. Brass has been a permanent valuable addition to the state. But, nevertheless, the great brass industry is greatly indebted to the tin industry which went before it, for without the selling organization provided by tin, the brass buttons could have reached no market.

For the manufacturing of clocks, too, the peddler supplied the market. In our colonial period, clocks were ponderous affairs made of wood and standing higher than a man. The spur of necessity

made the people of New England find new ways to gain a livelihood. Clock making was one of these new methods. The settlers applied their ingenuity toward making the clock cheap enough to go into the ordinary home, and less of a curiosity. The first improvement was the making of interchangeable parts. This alone greatly increased the production of clocks and cheapened their cost. Next the clock was made small enough to stand upon a shelf. This marked a new era. The small shelf clocks, like buttons and pins, found their market on the peddler's wagon and met with an astonishing sale. No longer were clocks the badges of the rich. Every poor man could own one. Many attempts to replace wood by metal or even glass in the clock parts failed because metal was expensive and wood very cheap. Not until 1837 was brass cheap enough to compete with wood. That year a radical improvement was made. Clocks were constructed to run for one day only and not for the customary eight days. The interchangeable parts were made of stamped brass, and the price was six dollars, an astoundingly low figure. Connecticut became the nation's timekeeper. Peddlers carried the new brass clocks into every nook and cranny of the land, becoming nearly as famous for clocks as they had been for tin. It was this wide sale that gave the industry its start. The peddler was the connecting link between a widespread, scattered demand and a bettered means of production.

So in many ways the peddler was the necessary go-between joining producer and consumer. Lack of a better means of transportation and communication helped him to build his trade routes. Peddling started at a time when roads were but poorly kept trails, oftentimes missing altogether. When turnpikes and canals were constructed they afforded the peddler a better means of getting about. His business was increased by extending its range. But when railroads were built the peddler's knell was sounded. The steam engine was quicker, cheaper and more efficient than the horse. People preferred trading with a man of their own community when that man could get goods quickly and cheaply by railroad.

So the peddler fell from grace. He was no longer a welcome visitor bringing news and wondrous trinkets from the world outside. His former trade went to the local tradesman. His cart lost its red paint and his horse no longer looked well kept. The character, too, of the man engaged in peddling changed; the shrewd, bareboned

Yankee was replaced by the bearded Hebrew or the unctious Greek. The jingling tin-cart was seen only in the remote districts far away from the railroads. To-day the trolley cars, rural free delivery and the parcels post are driving the peddler even out of this market. Soon he will be but a picturesque memory.

So although we must admit that the peddler deserved his reputation for being over-sharp in a bargain, we must not let this fact blind us to the real service he has rendered. When other means were lacking he provided a feasible way of getting goods into the hands of the users of the goods. Production without sale is failure. Distribution is the life of trade. Without the peddler as distributor many of New England's industries would have waited a much longer time to be born, and then conditions would have so changed that New England probably would not be their present home. New England ought to honor the peddler for his service rather than despise him for the manner in which the service was rendered.